

Matthew 21-26

From Swords to Plowshares

If you know the story of Jesus' last week before his crucifixion, you will know that Palm Sunday is not a cause for celebration so much as it is a stark warning about false expectations. We've just read highlights of the next and last five days of Jesus' life and found that it did not take much for those shouting "hosanna" and waving palms to start mocking him and chanting "crucify him." The crowd expected one thing from Jesus. What they got was something quite different, and it wasn't at all what they wanted.

I think that what made Jesus so popular was his great healing ability, and his message that the kingdom of God was at hand. To the average listener, that meant that Rome was on its way out, that crooked King Herod was on his way out, and Jesus was on his way in. And when Jesus was betrayed, and arrested, and tried and convicted, a think a lot of jaws dropped. How can this amazing man with such charisma and healing powers just allow all this to happen? I suppose that the one moment that must have seem disappointing to so many of Jesus' disciples would have been in the Garden of Gethsemane on Thursday night when Judas and some soldiers come to arrest Jesus. It was there that the disciples were ready to draw their swords and fight, but then Jesus shocked them by telling them to put away their swords. Some of the disciples probably envisioned the beginning of a revolution probably thought they could take on the contingent of soldiers that came with Judas to arrest Jesus. And they probably thought that many others would join their ranks – the crowds who were waving the palms and singing "Hosanna." Jesus, the son of David would take his seat on the throne in Jerusalem, and the Romans and the Herodians and the corrupt temple establishment would be swept away as the new Kingdom would begin, and God himself would return to the temple. Such a revolution would take place about 40 years later, and the Romans would be cast out, only to return in force and destroy Jerusalem and the beloved temple.

But that's what the people wanted. They were hungry for a fight and they were going to prove themselves if Jesus had only called them to raise those swords. Yeah, that must have been the most shocking, disappointing moment in the disciple's career, to be told to put away their swords, that this kingdom was not

going to be wrought in the same way every other kingdom had been wrought in, through armed conflict and conquest.

And it must have made the disciples wonder if this kingdom that Jesus was talking about really existed, or had he been lying to them, leading them on only to lose his nerve in the end.

Or had the kingdom already come? Perhaps Jesus was reigning in a new sort of kingdom that was so radically different from the kingdoms of the world that people didn't even notice it had arrived.

This is the point I'd like to make this morning; from the moment Jesus began his ministry, God's kingdom had come on earth as it is in heaven. It is a kingdom of love and forgiveness, of healing and serving one another – that started long before Easter. Some people like to imagine that the kingdom began at Easter, when Jesus was resurrected, thus showing that the forces of sin and wickedness that had nailed Jesus to the cross were defeated – I guess Jesus showed them a thing or two. But that's not the narrative. The forces of evil still have their influence in this world and in our own hearts. We just confessed to twelve distinct sins that existed in Jesus' day and certainly exist in our day, but we could name many more. We could build a wall of milk crates higher than the sanctuary ceiling. The question is, "Do you believe in that sort of kingdom, or do you believe in God's kingdom?" Do you believe in the kingdom that rules by force, by might, by coercion, by threat, and by fear? Or do you prescribe to God's kingdom, a kingdom of love and healing and forgiveness and grace? You see, that Kingdom was already established in Jesus' heart as he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He knew that he was going to die because the kingdom of this world still exercises its power through fear and through threat. But God had to demonstrate his love by going all the way to the cross. And our challenge is to see God's glory *there*, in the suffering and death of Jesus. That's what Lent is all about, and that's what this passion week is all about, to see the glory of God in the cross.

We have built this wall of sin that stands between us and the kingdom of God. I ask you to re-commit yourself to the ways of Jesus, the way of the cross, the way of healing and forgiveness and kindness and service, not of domination or intimidation, of pride and egotism. I invite you to pass beyond this wall as you come to altar to pray. May we strive to dwell in God's kingdom.